

## Learning Catalan in Andorra

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As a language teacher, obviously I think language learning is pretty cool. You can call me a nerd. At some point or another, I studied Spanish for about a million years, French for three years, and Portuguese for one year. In all three cases, however, I studied in a classroom, from a book, with a teacher. I copied down hundreds of verb conjugations, pored over prepositions and collocations, memorized arbitrary noun genders, and turned long lists of vocabulary into flashcards, all in a formal context. There are some grammatical rules I could probably recite in my sleep to this day.

Enter Catalan, my fourth “second language.” Most people go their whole lives without knowing that Catalan exists. In spring of 2015, however, I received some big news: I would be moving to the tiny European country of Andorra to teach English. Most people don't know Andorra exists either, but it does, and it's the only country in the world where the official language is Catalan, so I figured I had better learn it.

The thing about learning Catalan is that it's not like learning English, or even Spanish. It's not one of the languages typically offered in a Modern Languages department. You can't just turn on your TV or radio in the United States and find a Catalan channel. Your local bookstore probably doesn't have a Catalan-English dictionary. You'd be hard-pressed to find a native speaker in most places. Google Translate, never perfect in any language, is hilariously bad in Catalan.

That left me with the Internet, and while there are millions of webpages and well-developed apps for learning English, the same cannot be said of Catalan. In the end, I downloaded an app full of basic Catalan phrases. Eighteen months later, I have yet to use most of them. The first sentence I learned, “I'll call the police!” has fortunately never been necessary, and the second, “I'm from England,” is not actually true.

Thus, the day I arrived on the ground in Andorra was, more or less, the first time I had ever heard real, live Catalan. The real learning began. Catalan is closely related to both Spanish and French, so my background in those two languages certainly helped at the beginning. On my first day at my new school, I walked in and confidently recited the sentences I had practiced in Catalan: “Hello, I'm Sara. I'm the new English teacher. I need to speak to the director.” My new coworkers were duly impressed, but I soon realized I had made a terrible mistake, because now



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they wrongly believed that if they spoke Catalan to me, I would understand. Embarrassed and horrified, I was too nervous to tell them otherwise. The day passed in a blur. I nodded a lot and spoke very little, until someone finally, mercifully introduced me to the head of the English department.

Early on, I thought I was doing quite well, considering. In our first all-staff meeting, I caught the gist of at least two things someone said. Looking back, I realize how clueless I was. I have learned so much along the way that it's almost a miracle I managed to communicate with anyone back then.

I say almost because I had a not-so-secret weapon: Spanish. Catalan is the first and official language of Andorra, but I have never come across a monolingual speaker; every Catalan speaker I know is also a Spanish speaker. While this was great in the sense that I could do anything and everything I wanted to do in Spanish, it made it all too easy to just...not learn Catalan.

During my first month in Andorra, I signed up for the free Catalan classes offered by the Andorran government. I wanted someone to meticulously explain to me the verb conjugations, the pronunciation, the vocabulary, the slight-but-important differences between Spanish and Catalan. My Catalan teacher, María, was just the person to do so; she was knowledgeable, patient, and had a good sense of humor. Unfortunately, classes were two hours long. At 8:30 at night. Up a giant hill. After a full day of work. Without time for dinner. I admit: I quit after less than a month. *I'll figure it out. How hard can it be?* I told myself.

Honestly, it was pretty hard sometimes. In group settings, I frequently felt lost and struggled to follow quick exchanges. In one-on-one settings, people switched to Spanish to make me comfortable. I appreciated this because, of course, I generally want to sound like an intelligent, articulate adult. In Spanish, I can manage that. In Catalan, I could not, unless the conversation was conveniently about buying round trip boat or train tickets, which is a common topic in my textbooks but a rare one in a landlocked country with no trains. I found, too, that once I established a relationship with someone in one language, it was almost impossible to switch to speaking another language with them. It felt unnatural, like putting on a different personality—one that was far less well-spoken.

That feeling that I couldn't have an interesting conversation in Catalan made me too nervous to use it most of the time. As a teacher, I spent all day telling my students not to be embarrassed to speak English. When the tables were turned, however, I clammed up. The only time I really dared to try my Catalan was in easy situations where I could follow a script and mentally prepare myself beforehand: eating at a restaurant, shopping at the supermarket, ordering a coffee. As soon as anyone veered off my mental script, however, I panicked and reverted to Spanish. Any Andorran who made the mistake of addressing me in Catalan when I wasn't expecting it received a flustered jumble of words in at least three languages; if they were lucky, one of them was Catalan. Andorrans are so used to this that they don't even blink; I genuinely think they don't even notice most of the time.

I needed a situation to practice with less pressure. On a trip to Barcelona, I was determined to speak Catalan. *I'm in Barcelona*, I thought. *No one knows me here. I have nothing to lose.* I was excited. I walked into cafés and ordered things. I spoke to taxi drivers. I checked into hotels. I did it all in Catalan; I was Superwoman. Until, of course, every single person responded to me in

Spanish. I persisted in Catalan—I was in charge of this conversation! How dare they! They came back at me with more Spanish. I accepted defeat. I was crushed. Was my Catalan that terrible? Did they not understand me because I was speaking Andorran Catalan? Are people from Barcelona just a giant bunch of jerks?

In the end, I bemoaned my failure to a taxi driver in Barcelona—in Spanish, sadly. “It’s not you,” he told me. “It’s just that we get so many tourists that when we hear a foreign accent, we speak Spanish to them. We assume no one speaks Catalan.” I pointed out that it was silly to assume I didn’t speak Catalan *while I was speaking Catalan*, but he only shrugged. Why didn’t anyone appreciate my efforts?

Over time, I got a little braver in my own territory. While I still spoke to my friends in Spanish, I talked to more and more Andorran strangers in Catalan, and I noticed something: Catalan speakers (outside of Barcelona, apparently!) love effort. They are fiercely proud of their language, and they have spent their whole lives being told, explicitly or implicitly, that it simply isn’t worth learning for an outsider. Why bother, when all Catalan speakers speak Spanish? Why bother, when you can’t use it anywhere else? Why bother?

If you do happen to bother, if you take the time to learn some Catalan, even if it’s just a few phrases, it means the world to them. I have spit out sentences that butchered their poor language, mixing in a conglomeration of Spanish, French, and Portuguese, conjugating verbs embarrassingly wrong, pronouncing things hideously, even inventing words, and they have, nine times out of ten, been lavish in their compliments. All because I tried. “An American who speaks Catalan?!” they exclaim. Their faces are bright with shock. They beam. I become one of them. “Of course,” I say. “I live here.” I shrug like it’s nothing, because I’m a linguistic genius, obviously. Fake it ‘til you make it, right?

And then, finally, something clicked. It was the end of my first year here. Two of my friends came to visit, and they wanted an authentic cultural experience. They wanted to visit a tiny goat farm where they make homemade cheeses and a little pig farm where they make sausage on-site. These farms were in rural Catalunya, where the most Catalan of Catalans can be found. There, the Catalan independence flag flies proudly and language is a political statement as much as a method of communication. “Can you contact them and ask them if we could visit?” my friend asked. “They’ll respond better to someone who lives there than a bunch of random tourists.” The pressure was on; I had to deliver. I did the most nerve-wracking thing a language learner can do: I picked up the phone.

I called these nice Catalan farmers, I spoke Catalan to them and... they spoke Catalan back! They were delighted to show us around. They heaped compliments on my Catalan and how an American had learned. They never once switched to Spanish. My friends were impressed as I translated our tours for them. I felt like a hero. A linguistic genius indeed. Of course, I couldn’t translate everything perfectly. My vocabulary relating to the cheese-making process is limited even in English, but Pep the goat farmer never wavered in his belief that I understood him, and that’s what mattered.

Since then, I’ve stuck to my Catalan. Some days, I desperately want someone to sit down and explain things to me the way I’m used to, with a helpful chart or a little diagram. The logical part of my brain begs for order and I want to put words into neat little boxes and apply tidy formulas to them. However, learning a language in an immersion setting isn’t like that.

Learning a language in an immersion setting is saying, “Please correct my mistakes” and then realizing you’ve been making the same mistake for months and no one has ever bothered to tell you. It’s asking a native speaker, “How do you know which pronoun to use?” and getting that answer we learn as language teachers never to give: “That’s just the way it is.” It’s asking people to repeat or rephrase themselves again and again. It’s blushing when I make an awkward mistake. It’s finding exchange partners who are willing to embarrass themselves in English in return for me embarrassing myself in Catalan, because we might as well embarrass ourselves together. It’s learning Catalan in bars and on hikes, instead of in a classroom. It’s learning curse words first. It’s humiliating and frustrating and humbling, but it’s also rewarding and stimulating and fun. My Catalan is still far from perfect, but my seven-year-old students recently gave me a score of 9,734,085 in Catalan, only just shy of my 10,000,000 points for English, so I have it on pretty good authority that I’m doing okay.

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